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ABSTRACT

Research findings concerning the relationship of grade retention to the self-concepts and academic achievement of middle and junior high school students, and to school promotion standards are examined. The few studies conducted in this area of research seem to indicate that (1) failure to be promoted to a higher grade is related to children's self-concept, peer status, and personality development, (2) grade retention does not generally result in improved academic achievement (although some retained pupils become better students than some regularly promoted pupils), and (3) when matched on the basis of mental ability, students in schools with high promotion standards do not achieve better than students in schools with lower promotion standards. It is concluded that more and better research on the effects of grade retention is needed, that if non-promotion is to occur, the earlier it is done the better, and that since alternatives to non-promotion are not possible in all school districts, teachers and school administrators should give high priority to discovering innovative methods for reaching problem students. It is emphasized that rerouting low achieving or immature students through the same course one, two or three years in a row is not an answer. (Author/RH)

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FAILURE SYNDROME: STRESS FACTOR FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN

Ray Purkerson and Edie Whitfield

What creates as much stress in the life of a middle school student as going blind or losing a parent? According to Professor K. Yamamoto, in a 1980 study, the answer is academic retainment. Almost five percent of all students are retained each year (Gorton, 1970), and some schools retain as many as 36%, (Dobbs & Neville, 1967). In addition (based on a 1975 study) the annual cost of grade retention approaches and often exceedes one billion dollars (Jackson, 1975).

Amazingly, however, only 28 states within the U.S. collect data dealing with grade retention (Gorton, 1970). In a 1970 study, Gorton refers to retention as "representative," not "definitive", and points out that most occurs at the early elementary years and during "points of change in the grade-level structure patterns."

When seeking reasons for student retention four answers readily occur: (1) Administrative decree, (2) Student under achievement and/or immaturity, (3) Environmental influences, and (4) Teacher-pupil personality conflicts (Gorton, 1970). Locating criteria necessary to predict which child will with reasonable accuracy, benefit from retention is extremely difficult (if not impossible) (Koons, 1977). Adding to the complexity of the problem, some recent trends bring retention conflicts into even closer focus. The pendulum continues to swing from an emphasis on intellecutal, or cognitive to emotional or affective education. Currently trends seem to be moving from social promotion to competency-based promotion therefore Glasser's (1971) call for schools without failure meets stiff challenges from educators, such as Cunningham and Owen, (1977), who insist that students must master basic fundamentals prior to promotion.

In view of these recent developments, it is not suprising that grade retention research studies are practically non-existent or that what has been done (for the most part) is deficient or inappropriate (Jackson, 1975). (In fact, the authors, after extensive referencing and cross-referencing, could not locate a single study reporting effects of non-rpomotion on middle schoolers or junior high schoolers, either in relation to achievement, to self-concept, or to immaturity.) Because grade retention is occurring on a wide scale, especially in smaller rural schools, and because of the increasing tempo of calls for pre-promotion competency, research and study are essential.

As a result this paper will attempt to analyze and synthesize what little research has been done in the field of middle and junior high school grade retention and seek to point out some severe problem areas. Research studies found are, basically, only peripheral; that is, they deal with studies of elementary-level failure after the student has moved into middle or junior high school. We will examine the relationship of grade retention, first, to self-concept, second, to academic achievement, and, finally to school standards.

As long ago as 1941, the results of grade retention were being investigated regarding effects of children's personality development. Rudolph Anfinson, (1941) conducted a study of Anglo-American students in four junior high schools in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He attempted to equate two groups of boys and girls, one containing no retainees and the other composed of students who had failed at least one semester. He also equated the groups on the basis of school attendance, chronological age, sex, intelligence, and socio-economic status. Of interest is that most failures occurred in the first grade, especially during the second semester. Also of special interest is that few junior high students who had been retained were included in the study due to incomplete data in their folders.

Anfinson's findings, however, are relevant, because behaviors studied were the same as those exhibited in seventh grade. He found that there was". . . a significant difference between the groups in social and personal adjustment," the advantage being with the non-repeaters. Specifically, 45 percent of regularly promoted students, as compared with 61 per cent of repeaters, were classed as "below average" in adjustment, with all measurements based on the Symonds-Block Student Questionnaire. (Anfinson does, however, qualify his results with calls for better personality questionnaires, and for personality surveys closer to the point of failure.) Even though class failure does effect personality development, Anfinson concludes that these failures may". . . have a spurring influence on others and elicit from them effort toward better adjustment, achievement, and advancement," and that". . .maladjustment was not directly associated with non promotion. . .to such an extent that non promotion may be regarded as the essential factor in future maladjustment."

Two studies of the effects of non-promotion on self-concept and personality, one in 1956 and another in 1973, were conducted with junior-high-aged students. A study by White and Howard (1973) examined the correlation of self-concept and non-promotion.

Morrison's study measured sociometric status of 177 fifth and sixth grade students in suburban Santa Barbara County, California. He interviewed each student in their own classroom and asked them to choose three friends to play with, to work together in committees, and to take home for a party. Perry's study had students choose three students with whom they wished to sit.

Together, Morrison and Perry conclude that". . .the overage child was found to have significantly lower choice statuses than did peers." Specifically, the researchers conclusions take on added interest: overaged children in grades four, five, and six were". . .definitely not well accepted." While the ". . .least discrimination against overage children occurred in grades seven and eight." The most logical reason for this difference in acceptance would be that older children learn to compensate for overagedness, particularly in athletics and other leadership areas.

The White and Howard study sought to analyze whether a poor self-concept causes non-promotion or whether non-promotion causes poor self-concept. In short, which comes first: poor self-concept or non-promotion? To answer this question, the authors administered the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965) to sixth graders during the spring semester. They conclude that ". . .failure to be promoted is related to the self-concept" of boys and girls alike. The major suggestion the authors make is that earlier problems which lead to non-promotion can be "diagnosed and cured", and are less likely to damage self-concept.

A second major area of concern dealing with middle school students is the effect that grade retention has on achievement. Two studies, one in 1928, and one in 1963, have dealt with this problem. Klene and Branson, (1929), ". . .because of a growing feeling than repeating a grade was of no real value," described a Long Beach, California, study they conducted in which non-promoted pupils were compared with other non-promoted pupils who were given trial promotion. Students equaled on chronological age, mental age, I.Q., and grade were compared. The researchers, after analyzing students from grades two through six, concluded that, the trial promoted group achieved

more than the non-promoted group. Of special interest to those of us dealing with the middle school student is that, according to Klene and Branson, the older the student, especially those in grades four through six, the less justifiable is the non-promotion for academic reasons. This is especially true of students with less than average ability.

A more detailed study was conducted by Kami and Weikart, (1961). They researched school marks, achievement, and intelligence of seventh graders who were retained once in elementary school. These students were equated as closely as possible with seventh graders who had never been retained. Each group had 22 boys and 9 girls, all from Ypsilanti, Michigan. Achievement was measured on the Iowa Every Pupil Tests of Basic Skills, and intelligence was measured on the California Test of Mental Maturity.

Conclusions seem readily applicable to many levels of middle and junior high school. In terms of school marks, an extra year in elementary school does not seem to bring the retained student up to the level of the regularly promoted student. As evidenced by the achievement test, the retained group achieved ". . .less in seven years than the normal group achieved in six years." (Thirty-nine per cent of the retained group attained the sixth grade level in arithmetic, for example, and 87 per cent of the "normal group" attained the sixth grade level." In the third area, intelligence tests, normal groups tested significantly higher (112.6 as opposed to 94) than the retained group. Given the same I.Q. range, however, the normal group earned better marks than the non-promoted group.

According to Kami and Wekart evidence indicates that retention does not help in the long run. One point they make, however, is especially relevant, some retained pupils become better students than some regularly promoted ones. The question arises then as to what kinds of pupils benefit from retention and what kinds do not? The real issue is not, do we retain,

but whom do we retain? Do we formulate an iron-clad policy to promote or not promote, or do we expend more time and effort to pinpoint each and every middle or junior high student who will benefit from grade retention?

An interesting aspect of non-promotion was reported by Walter Cook (1941) in a study which researched effects of schools' high standards of promotion. The question was raised, can those schools having minimum grade standards and required levels of achievement before promotion, boast of higher achievement in relation to ability than can schools with less stringent promotion policies? To find answers, Cook studied eighteen groups of Minnesota seventh graders equated by age, sex, race, and socio-economic status. The two groups were organized into high ratio schools (schools with more over-aged students) and low ratio schools (schools with fewer over-aged students).

The author's conclusion was that high percentages of over-age pupils retained in upper grades in schools with high standards of promotion, lower mean intelligence and achievement of other classmates when compared with schools having more lenient standards of promotion. In brief, students with equal mental ability do not achieve better in schools with high promotion standards.

One important point, Jackson (1975) analyzed non-promotion practices and suggested (rather forcibly) that only three research studies of non-promotion effects have been conducted free of biases, and there are outdated and inconclusive. He further insists that there is no ". . .reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties. He suggests that his ". . .conclusions should not be interpreted to mean that promotion is better than retention. . .but that valid inferences cannot be drawn (because of poor reserach evidence) concerning the relative benefits" of the two policies.

The logical conclusion is, that scientifically accurate and unbiased research regarding effects of non-promotion during middle school and junior high school years is essential. According to Jackson future research must absolutely be more experimental and low achieving students must be more carefully defined and equated before comparisons are made. Comparing students experiencing trouble with those not having trouble in that same grade is fruitless. They must be equated before promotion dates and randomly assigned to promoted and non-promoted groups before comparison and findings are categorized.

Beyond the need for better research, can additional conclusions about existing studies of transescent grade retention be made? In relation to self-concept, not being promoted does affect personality development, but not to the point of being the primary cause of future maladjustment. The acceptance of non-promoted (overaged) students by their classmates is severe in grades five and six but much less severe in grades seven and eight. Finally, as a rule, if non-promotion is to occur, the earlier the better. Further, self-concept and personality do not exist separately and apart from academic achievement. Very simply, some low achieving students benefit from non-promotion; some do not. The educator's task is to do everything possible to make correct decisions.

Continuous-progress grading, indvidualized instruction, smaller classes, etc., are ideal as substitutions for non-promotion, but are not possible in all school districts. Therefore, discovering innovative methods for reaching problem students must be considered as top priorities by school administrators and teachers. Rerouting a low achieving or immature student through the same course one, two or three years in a row is not an answer. As an example, "The Greensville Program: A Commonsense Approach to Basics," (Owen and Ramik 1977)

describes how one school district tried to retain low achieving students in a dignified, innovative manner. Therefore, from the viewpoint of accountability and professionalism one must assume that every educator will make the best decision for each student, even when that decision is not to promote.

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